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Congress should reject child support cuts

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Congress is poised to make a critical funding decision that will have a dramatic impact on children and families in our community.

The U.S. House of Representatives' proposed budget reconciliation package eliminates \$4.9 billion in payments to states for child support enforcement services. In Ramsey County alone, this would result in an estimated \$30 million reduction in child support collections over the next five years.

I can't imagine a more counterproductive, ill-conceived budget decision than cutting child support programs. Child support enforcement is a highly effective investment that promotes self-sufficiency and fosters stable and safer communities. This isn't a government handout program; it's a proven strategy that holds parents accountable for the financial well-being of their children. This system was created because some people weren't supporting their children. It would be a deplorable step backward to undercut this effort.

We have worked very hard in Ramsey County to ensure that families get the support they deserve. These efforts have proven to be highly cost-effective. We collect nearly \$60 million annually for more than 35,000 families. According to the most recent state performance report, county child support agencies disburse an average of \$4.23 for every dollar spent. In Ramsey County, we have pushed that even higher — to \$4.95. To put it another way, for our \$1 investment, a child gets nearly \$5 worth of food, clothing and other basic necessities of life.

The proposed cutback in federal funding would make it extremely difficult for our office and other child support agencies to ensure children get the financial support they need. Without this support, many more children will grow up in poverty and face uphill struggles in life. The relationship between childhood poverty and criminal behavior later in life is well established. Conversely, children in single-parent families who receive child support do better on several measures of child well-being than similar children who do not receive child support.

Effective child support enforcement also is a critical component of welfare reform. Improvements in child support enforcement are an important factor in families' decreased dependence on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) income supplements, according to University of Michigan researchers. It is doubtful these advances in welfare reform could be sustained under a weakened child support system.

Under the House proposal, federal reimbursement to the states (and the counties, in turn) for child support services would be reduced from the current rate of 67 percent to 50 percent within five years. In Ramsey County, that would mean an estimated loss of 50 child support workers — or 32 percent of our staff. That would leave two bad alternatives: 1) drastically reduced service and collections or 2) a bigger burden for local taxpayers. We shouldn't have to make either choice.

The good news is that the U.S. Senate recently took a position against cuts in child support funding. Rep. Betty McCollum and four other members of Congress from Minnesota also opposed the cuts. A House-Senate Conference Committee now will decide the fate of the child support program, along with other important programs that help kids and families.

How can Congress even think about cutting a program that does so much good in such a cost-effective way? Again, it's not a handout. The federal Office of Management and Budget rated it the highest performing social services program in the nation. We need to send a strong message to Congress to stop the proposed cuts.

Gaertner is the Ramsey County Attorney.